

From the

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Reviving a Greek Revival Traditional Plaster and Limewash Restoration on a Lower Garden District Mansion

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Limewashed exterior plaster on a building is truly a beautiful thing to behold. When the limewash contains pigments, the colors undulate in subtle ways,

refracting light and warmth. The smooth surface is cool and powdery to the touch. Pictures do not do justice to the exterior plaster restoration at 1420 Eu-

terpe St. in the Lower Garden District. To really appreciate this work of art, it is something you must experience yourself.

Plaster, also known as stucco, is one of the most common and ancient of traditional building materials. Scarce in modern construction, lime-based plaster and limewash are not entirely lost crafts. By choosing these methods, a homeowner enters into a commitment to maintain the finish, which can mean annual limewashing, gradually building up that protective layer, for up to 10 years. However, the homeowner can reap in the reward of these processes: an attractive, luminous exterior treatment that is historically accurate to the building and protects the plaster from the elements.

Historically, plaster was used as a way to dress up a brick structure — a plaster coating over

wood or brick substrate could be scored or lined to emulate elegant (and expensive) stonework. 1420 Euterpe St. was built in 1846, during which time Greek Revival architecture was en vogue. The practice of scoring plaster was a way for the homeowner to achieve the look of a Grecian stone building without the cost. More importantly, plaster acts as a protective coating, essential to buildings constructed in the early part of the 19th century. During this period, the masonry products used tended to be locally sourced soft brick, which,



Built in 1846, and occupied by Union Soldiers during the Civil War, 1420 Euterpe St. later served as home to the New Orleans Freedmen's Bureau. In 2007, the house received traditional plaster repair and limewash application made possible with funds from the Historic Building Recovery Grant Program.

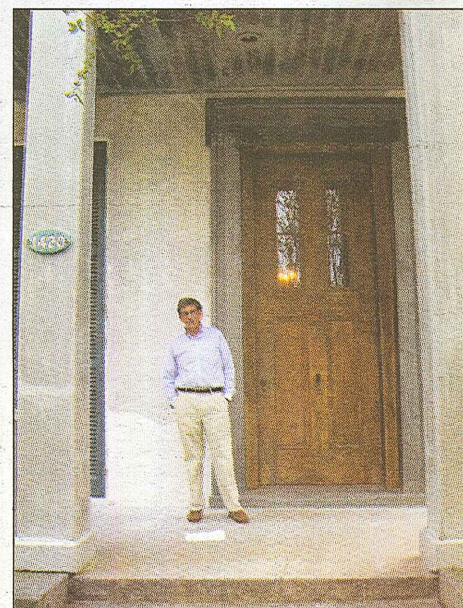


Photo by Dan Digiluseppe

Lou Costa, outside of his home. Costa and his wife, Mary Len, are also founding members of the Coliseum Square Association.

due to the clay that was used and the low heat of the kilns, is very susceptible to water damage.

As traditional exterior plaster is a natural, organic material, it needs periodic maintenance if exposed to weather. Finishes such as a whitewash or limewash help to maintain its strength and beauty. It is important to note that this exterior treatment acts as a system: the limewash is the first line of defense for the plaster, which, in turn, protects the masonry of the house. This is why maintenance is an absolute necessity. Homeowners with historic houses must realize the responsibility that comes with their dignified buildings.

Lou and Mary Costa are homeowners who chose to breathe life back into their mid-1800s Lower Garden District house on Euterpe Street. The effects of time, improper repairs by previous owners, and Katrina all played a



Photo by Dan Digioseppe



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Corner of house after removing damaged plaster (above) and after receiving three coats of plaster (below). The gray coloring of the patch indicates that the plaster is still drying. Slow drying prevents cracks in the plaster. The discolorations in original plaster are a result of a modern aluminum paint that was applied in the 1950s. The house received several treatments of a gentle, peroxide-based Cathedral Stone® paint stripper, but some stains still remain. Incompatible with plaster, impermeable paint must be removed before limewashing, enabling the limewash to properly adhere to the plaster.

part in the degraded condition of the exterior plaster. In many areas, layers of plaster were flaking and falling away from the bulging and disintegrating brick courses. Repairs dating from the 1940s were severely compromising the plaster on the house. The rigid Portland cement patches, including a one-foot band along the base of the house, were incompatible with softer lime-based plaster, and added to moisture damage due to the rising damp.

In early 2007, the Costas were awarded funds from the Historic Building Recovery Grant

Program to help them with hurricane-related repairs to their house at 1420 Euterpe St. Heather Knight, principal of Chaux Vive Preservation Services, performed the painstaking exterior plaster repair. She was assisted by Tulane School of Architecture Master of Preservation Studies students and conservation assistants. *Chaux Vive* means “quick lime” in French and reflects Knight’s dedication to the use and preservation of traditional methods and materials, such as lime. Knight also worked alongside a local fourth-generation master plasterer.

Using documentation and scientific analysis, Heather Knight and her team of students and conservation assistants employed traditional methods and materials to restore the exterior fabric of the house. They began by removing loose and damaged plaster and taking out as much Portland cement as possible (in some areas it was left in place, as the cement had bonded so tightly with the soft brick that it would have caused more damage to remove). Next, a traditional three-coat plaster process was applied to these areas. For more technical information on plaster, including its application, see “Historic Plaster Exposed,” found on page 7. The entire northern lower gallery wall received a fresh covering of plaster, and then was scored to resemble natural stone. Finally, the main body of the house received five coats of hand-pigmented warm yellow ochre limewash, just as the house received when it was built in 1846. The budget parameters of this project only allowed for five coats. However, with annual limewashing, the Costas will be able to achieve the ideal eggshell protective coating that the plaster needs and the uniform color that they desire.

The Costas have striven to restore their home to its former glory. As a result of this responsible stewardship, they will be able to enjoy the beauty of the home’s traditional plaster for years to come. Theirs is truly a showpiece home in the Lower Garden District.



Photo by Heather Knight

Northern lower gallery wall before plaster repairs and limewash.



Photo by Erin Edwards

Northern lower gallery wall during plaster repairs and limewash. Here, Knight is applying the first, or scratch, coat to the masonry.

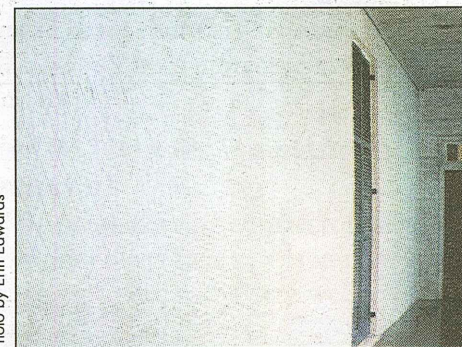


Photo by Erin Edwards

The first, or scratch, coat is shown above. The crosshatches help to form a strong bond with the next layer of plaster.

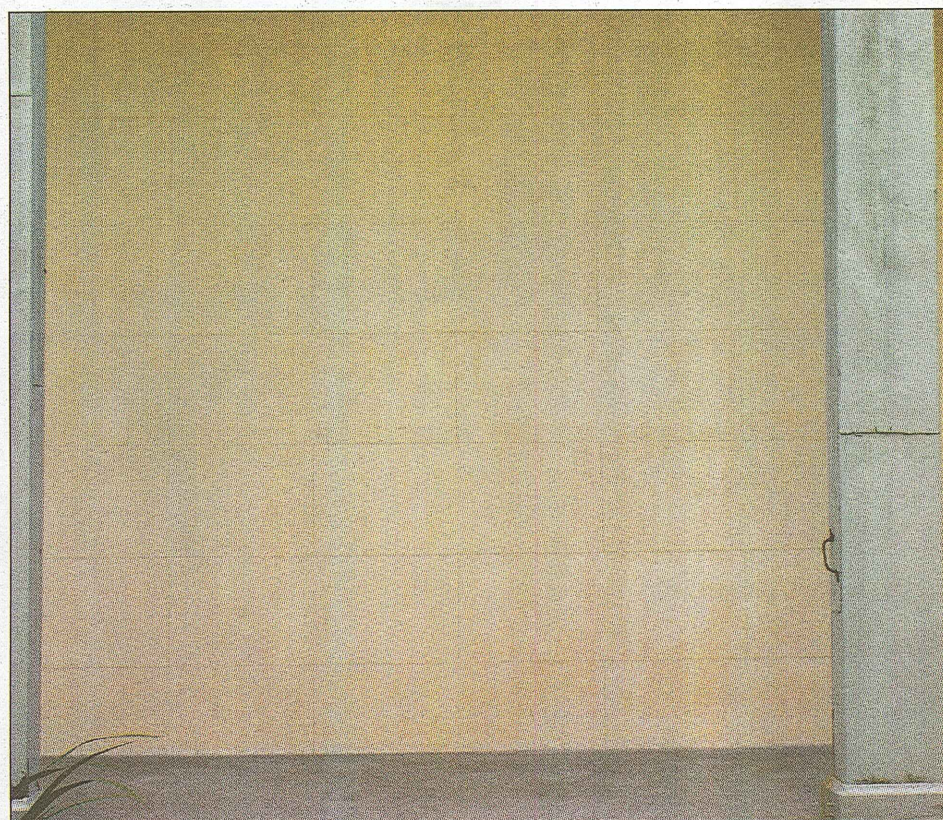


Photo by Liz Russell

Northern lower gallery wall after plaster repairs and limewash. Note scored plaster to resemble stone blocks.